

# Deflection Strategies to Meet People Where They Are and Reduce Harms Associated With Substance Use Disorders

Catching Up With COSSUP, August 2024

Deflection has emerged as a key intervention employed by first responders and law enforcement agencies across the country to steer individuals with mental health or substance use issues away from both traditional arrest and prosecution pathways and use of emergency resources. Many deflection programs are taking their efforts a step further by incorporating harm minimization strategies, in addition to linking individuals to treatment. Harm reduction is a public health approach that aims to minimize the negative consequences associated with various behaviors, including, but not limited to, substance use. While needle exchange is a well-known form of harm reduction for substance use, other examples include overdose prevention education, drug-checking devices such as fentanyl test strips, and medication-assisted treatment such as the provision of methadone or buprenorphine. When the goal is to keep people who use substances out of the criminal justice system or emergency departments, taking advantage of these harm reduction options ensures that they can be kept as healthy as possible.

Law enforcement agencies are working alongside harm reductionists in community outreach initiatives that go beyond traditional enforcement responses in the community to instead foster compassion and community well-being. In Western Massachusetts, Officer Gary Hagar of the Westfield Police Department (WPD) has partnered with community outreach worker Gabriel Quaglia from Folding Chair Project and Tapestry Health. Before this collaboration, the WPD was already conducting post-overdose outreach with a hospital public health nurse. However, as law enforcement and hospital employees, they were limited in the services they could provide to overdose survivors. This is where Tapestry Health stepped in to fill those gaps. Mr. Quaglia was armed with naloxone and ready to join the WPD to provide more comprehensive services to program participants.

With a harm reductionist on board, the WPD looked for volunteers among its ranks to work with Mr. Quaglia.

Officer Hagar was already working in community policing and was uniquely positioned as someone who both cared about the opioid crisis and knew the community well. These insights enabled Officer Hagar to identify people who needed assistance, opening the door for Mr. Quaglia to meet with them and deliver services tailored to their needs—whether it was detox, a sober home, naloxone, or even just information on how to use drugs more safely if they were not ready for treatment. Mr. Quaglia brought the mindset of “meeting people where they are” to their postoverdose support visits.

Officer Hagar realized early on that one of the biggest contributing factors to a visit’s success was arriving without any expectations and, instead, coming ready to facilitate an open dialogue. The winning formula was simple: make a connection, offer linkages to services and provide supportive service resources, then wait for the individual to take the next step. Mr. Quaglia utilized motivational interviewing techniques in the form of an opening question along the lines of “Why do you think you overdosed?” It was important for the first responders he worked with to hear the responses and understand an individual’s narrative at that point in time.

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*“I think, by offering those services . . . in the way that Gary [Hagar] mentioned, [we] can help reduce stigma. If to some degree, maybe familial stigma or internalized stigma . . . letting a person see that there doesn’t need to be an expectation from this provider or person in front of me of what I need to do.”*

—Gabriel Quaglia

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At the inception of the program, Officer Hagar said that the WPD was skeptical of its benefits. As they conducted more visits, engaged with the community, and connected participants with services—reducing overdose rates—the value quickly became clear to the rest of his department. Mr. Quaglia expanded on this, pointing out that the tone of people in the community who repeatedly ran into law enforcement was changing, with more now saying that they were working alongside him toward recovery.

In addition, Officer Hagar has been able to call on Mr. Quaglia for more active outreach support. When in the field at a location with a lot of drug use, harm reduction outreach was just a call away. Now that people were accessing treatment and support, the WPD reported a decrease in reported drug-related incidents. In turn, this reduction enabled the department to focus resources on responding to more serious crimes.

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*"I think if people become more educated on the benefits that [this program] offers, it takes a load off of our plate as police officers . . . we're inundated with almost everything now. If you can find an officer that's passionate about it and they start talking, it really goes through the police department . . . once one person did it and they saw how beneficial it was, it just continued to grow."*

—Officer Gary Hagar

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Augmenting public safety programs with the mindset and practices of harm minimization opens doors to treatment for people who are not yet engaged in medical and social services when they need them the most. Harm reduction is another tool in the public safety toolbox, ready to equip individuals with the resources they need to help them on their recovery journeys.